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THE STATESMEN OF ANCIENT INDIA.

THE political ability of the Hindu races has been so "cabined, cribbed, confined" during many centuries by successive allied dominations that modern foreign observers are hardly prepared to credit the ancient inhabitants of India with any high degree of skill in the art of government. I venture, however, to think that the facts of history warrant the assertion that in olden days the settled Indian races displayed marked ability for political organisation, and produced a considerable number of statesmen worthy to rank on equal terms with European rulers living in about the same stage of civilisation.

The merits and demerits of the half-foreign government of Akbar in the sixteenth century are sufficiently well-known, and that great monarch can well bear comparison as a statesman of the first rank with his contemporaries, Henry IV. of France and Elizabeth of England. But Akbar, notwithstanding that he utilised indigenous talent with wise liberality, was himself a foreigner almost as much as an English Viceroy is, and India cannot fairly claim his fine political qualities as those of one of her sons.

In order to obtain a view of a polity truly Indian we must go back to much earlier times, long before the Great Moguls were dreamt of; and, if we do so, we shall find that ancient India could breed statesmen, and we may thus be led to cherish the hope that, in this matter as in so many others, history will repeat itself. The annals of the south are so imperfectly known that we are compelled to exclude them from consideration, and to confine our attention to India north of the Nerbudda—the Hindustan of a later age.

Three periods of brilliantly successful Hindu government previous to the Muhammadan conquest stand out conspicuously, and a considerable amount of information concerning each is on record.

Owing to the well-known lack of historical literature in India proper—as distinguished from the border-lands of Ceylon, Kashmir, Nepal, and Assam, all of which have their chronicles—we are mainly dependent for our detailed knowledge of the government of the old Hindu empires upon the accounts of three foreign travellers, the first of whom was a Greek, while the second and third were Chinamen. The three periods referred to as those in which the natural Hindu capacity for government was best displayed are, firstly, the Maurya (321—232 B.C.), secondly, the Gupta (320—480 A.D.), and thirdly, the reign of Harsha (606—648 A.D.). The first period is marked by the names of Chandragupta, or Sandracottus, and Asoka. Two other Chandraguptas and Samudragupta are the glories of the second period. Harsha stands alone, and on a lower pedestal.

For each of these periods we fortunately possess the account of an impartial foreigner, who resided long in India and enjoyed ample opportunities for observation. The earliest of these alien sojourners, Megasthenes the Greek, represented his master Seleucus Nikator, lord of Western Asia, at the court of Chandragupta Maurya, the first emperor of India, and employed his spare time in making notes so well that the information collected by him continued to be the principal source of European knowledge of India until the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese navigators re-opened the routes of maritime commerce between the East and West, which had been long forgotten and disused. The book written by the Greek ambassador has not been preserved, but so many extracts from it were taken by extant authors that probably little of value has been lost. Megasthenes' account of the court and administration of Chandragupta Maurya is supplemented and continued by the autobiographical details in the inscriptions of Asoka, grandson of that monarch. The positive facts thus placed at the disposal of the historian are illustrated by the theoretical exposition of Hindu polity, ascribed by early tradition to Chanakya, the minister of Chandragupta, and certainly of ancient date. With the help of these documents and the testimony of buildings, sculptures and other monuments, the modern student is in a favourable position for appreciating the merits of the Maurya polity, notwithstanding the lapse of more than two millenniums.

Some authors have supposed that the idea of an Indian empire was suggested by the example of Alexander the Great; but the

better opinion seems to be that the model on which Chandragupta Maurya moulded his institutions was the Persian empire of Cyrus and his successors, on the throne of which Alexander sat for a few years. From the time of Darius, the son of Hystaspes, in 500 B.C. the rulers of India had been in touch with their great western neighbour, and were not in need of the example of Alexander to teach them imperial ideas. Chandragupta Maurya, whoever may have been his teacher, certainly learned how both to think and act imperially; and in the course of twenty-four years (321—297 B.C.) succeeded in clearing out the last of the Macedonian garrisons, in frustrating the attempt of Seleucus Nikator to recover the lost conquests of Alexander, and in establishing Magadha, the modern Bihar as a paramount power over a dominion extending from the Hindu Kush probably as far as the Nerbudda. So great an achievement is conclusive proof that Chandragupta Maurya possessed military and political ability of a high order. This conclusion is supported by the Greek account of the details of his government, which indicates that at that period—the fourth century B.C.—the world could not exhibit an example of a large state enjoying a government more skilled and efficient than that of the Indian empire.

The spirit of Chandragupta's rule was frankly despotic, and his methods for securing obedience were of the sternest. He was swift to shed blood, and relied on the agency of departmental officials, who had at their back a well-organised standing army and fleet. The central government, while necessarily entrusting ample authority to the rulers of remote provinces, watched those officers with jealous suspicion, and sought to curb their tendency to independence by a system of continuous espionage. Asoka's orders that the "king's men" should keep him fully informed on all public affairs are quite in accordance with the rules ascribed to his grandfather's minister, who attached high importance to the judicious use of governmental spies, and was prepared to sanction for the benefit of the crown the most unscrupulous proceedings on their part, subject to the theoretical proviso that they should be employed "only against the wicked, and never against the innocent and virtuous." The Hindu text-writer is as shameless as the Florentine Machiavelli in this respect, and does not hesitate to lay down that "state spies, whose profession is to administer poison to political offenders, may

bring about a quarrel between two guilty persons born of the same family, and administer poison to one or the other. The survivor and his party shall be accused of poisoning and their property confiscated and taken by the Government." The policy thus recommended is precisely the same as that of Machiavelli, which has been summarised as resting on the principle that "for the establishment and maintenance of authority all means may be resorted to, and that the worst and most treacherous acts of the ruler, however unlawful in themselves, are justified by the wickedness and treachery of the governed." No exceptionally high standard of morality is claimed for the ancient Hindu monarchs, most of whom, doubtless, were as unscrupulous as the Medici and Borgias. But it is clear that they possessed the capacity to govern strongly, if sternly, a vast empire, to handle effectually huge military forces, to maintain order, protect property, and enforce their will in the most distant provinces. It is a "long cry" from Patna (Pataliputra), the Maurya capital, to Girnar in Kathiawar, but Chandragupta had a Governor stationed at the latter place, who is recorded to have constructed an irrigation embankment, which was still worth repairing seven and a half centuries later.

Megasthenes tells us how the Indian Irrigation Department, like the similar institution in Egypt, regulated the rivers and systematically controlled the distribution of the water among the farmers. Modern zemindars and cultivators think themselves harshly treated because they have to pay water-rates, but their predecessors, more than two thousand years ago, suffered from the same grievance, and were compelled to pay *udaka-bhāga*, at heavy rates, described in Chanakya's book. Property was so well protected that the daily larcenies in the royal camp, with a population of four hundred thousand people, amounted to a mere trifle, and crime of all sorts was ruthlessly repressed. High roads were maintained, municipal institutions were fully developed, and adequate arrangements were made for safeguarding the interests of foreign residents. Without going further into detail, it may be asserted with confidence that in the Maurya age every department of State was well organised, according to ancient standards, and that the Indian system of government three centuries before the Christian era was equal, if not superior, to that of Akbar in the sixteenth century.

With reference to the quotation from Chanakya's treatise, which exhibits a low moral standard of state-craft, it is only fair to call attention to the very different tone of Asoka's edicts, which inculcate advanced moral doctrines, tinged with a Buddhist colouring, as applicable to both private and public affairs. How far the pious emperor's precepts were acted on cannot be determined now, but it is safe to assume that practice lagged far behind theory, and that Chanakya's prescriptions were often preferred by provincial governors to the less practical exhortations of the imperial preacher. Whatever may be our judgment concerning the ethical standard of the Maurya rule, there is no doubt that during three long reigns extending over nearly a century (321-232 B.C.), the central government, working from Patna, without the facilities for communication provided by modern inventions, successfully controlled all the parts of an empire as great as British India, and at the same time maintained its international dignity as the friend and ally on equal terms of the Greek contemporary sovereigns in Syria, Macedonia and Egypt.

After the decay of the Maurya dynasty, India passed through a long agony of internal dissension and foreign invasion. Very little is known about the administration of the government by the powerful Kushan or Indo-Scythian monarchs during the first and second centuries, A.D., but the scanty data available indicate that their rule was strong and organised on civilised lines. These kings, having been foreigners from the steppes of Central Asia, the question of their political capacity does not concern us at present.

The next truly native dynasty which claims attention is that of the Guptas, which was founded in 320 A.D., and ceased to be of importance about 480 A.D. The seat of Government of the earlier kings was Patna, as it had been six centuries before in Asoka's time, but the centre of political gravity was gradually shifted westwards, as the imperial power was extended to the shore of the Arabian Sea. Samudragupta (about 326—375 A.D.), an exceptionally accomplished prince, not content with the thorough subjugation of the greater part of Northern India, conducted a marvellous campaign in the South, and carried his victorious standards almost to the extremity of the peninsula. Such a feat of arms, although it did not result in permanent conquest, needed powers of no ordinary kind to ensure its success, and justly entitles the man who performed it to a high place

among soldier kings. But no detailed information concerning his internal administration is on record ; and we must be content to base our appreciation of the merits of Gupta government on the narrative of Fa-hien, a pious Buddhist pilgrim from China, who travelled and resided in India at the beginning of the fifth century, during the reign of Chandragupta II., son and successor of Samudragupta.

At that time the Hellenistic kingdoms founded by the successors of Alexander had long vanished, the Roman empire was staggering under the blows of Alaric the Goth, and the modern system of European states was still unborn. We learn, with some wonder, from the transparently truthful remarks of the simple-minded Chinese pilgrim, that Northern India then enjoyed an orderly and efficient government apparently superior to any contemporary administration in Europe.

Fa-hien, the pilgrim referred to, spent fourteen years in India, busily engaged in the study of Sanskrit and the collection of materials to aid in the propagation of the Buddhist faith in China. His mind being devoted to religion, he could spare little time or attention for secular affairs, to which he rarely alludes. But he felt constrained to give expression to his satisfaction with the Indian institutions among which he had lived for so many years, and he left on record a striking account of the political and social condition of the country, which excites agreeable surprise by the high praise bestowed. He gives no hint of ever having suffered loss or violence in the course of his extensive travels, and was especially delighted at the personal liberty permitted by the government and the absence of vexatious restrictions. The irritating system of passports, described by Chanakya as in force during Maurya times, had fallen into disuse, and the pilgrim observes in his homely way that "those who want to go away may go ; those who want to stop, may stop." In the "middle country" to the south of Mathura, he states emphatically that the people were "numerous and happy," and he was pleased to notice the mildness of the penal law, as contrasted with that of China. Most offences were visited merely by fines, the death penalty was unknown, and amputation of the right hand was inflicted only in cases of repeated violent crime. The officials were provided with salaries, and so were not constrained to "squeeze" the people. His description of Magadha and its

ancient capital is equally pleasing. He declares that "the inhabitants are rich and prosperous, and vie with one another in the practice of benevolence and righteousness." A specially interesting manifestation of public charity was the free hospital, where we are told the sick "get the food and medicines which their cases require, and are made to feel at ease ; and when they are better, they go away of themselves." This testimony proves beyond all doubt that the government of Chandragupta II. (Vikramâditya) struck a foreign traveller living under its protection as being eminently sensible and efficient—a government which permitted all reasonable liberty and encouraged the growth of both wealth and learning. The testimony is the more emphatic because the pilgrim was a zealous Buddhist, while King Chandragupta II. was an orthodox Hindu, specially devoted to the worship of Vishnu. No country in Europe at that period could have been described by a traveller in such terms, and the conclusion is inevitable that in 400 A.D. India possessed statesmen who knew how to govern effectually without the aid of cruelty. The general social prosperity and advanced political development were reflected in Sanskrit literature, which, at about the same time, attained its highest point in the works of Kalidasa.

About half a century after the visit of Fa-hien, the prosperity of the Gupta dominions was rudely disturbed by the irruption of hordes of wild nomads from Central Asia, known to the Indians as Hunas, to European writers as White Huns, and to the Chinese as Yetha or Ephthalites. They appeared in the Gangetic provinces for the first time about 455 A.D., when they were repulsed by the Crown Prince ; but fresh swarms poured in, and overcame the Hindu resistance. In the course of a few years the Huns established themselves as the dominant power of Northern India. Both as impure casteless foreigners and as cruel brigands they were naturally loathed by the natives, whom they oppressed without mercy. About 528 A.D. a confederacy of Hindu princes of the interior rose against their intolerable tyranny, and succeeded in driving the Hun leader, Mihiragula, back into the frontier provinces of the Punjab and Kashmir.

But the long continued troubles due to the barbarian invasion had sapped the foundations of Hindu polity, and destroyed the fabric of the Gupta empire ; so that, even when the enemy had

been driven back, no great statesman arose to restore prosperity to the suffering land. The sixth century, from the time of the Hun defeat, practically is a blank for the historian, and no ruler of note appeared until 606 A.D., when Harsha, King of Thanesar and Kanauj, came to the throne. In the course of a long reign of forty-two years, he made himself master of the greater part of Upper India, and enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing the kings of Assam in the far east and of Kathyawar in the far west attend pageants as vassals in his train.

Just as we are indebted to Fa-hien, the earliest of the Chinese Buddhist pilgrims, for the early extant account of Gupta internal administration, so our knowledge of the system of government adopted by Harsha is mainly derived from the writings of the most celebrated of the Chinese travellers, Hiuen Tsang, Master of the Law, who, like his predecessor, spent about fourteen years in India (630-44). He gives a lively account of the power and magnificence of Harsha, who was a strong and ambitious monarch, engaged in schemes of conquest almost up to the end of his life. Although order was not preserved quite so well as in the days of the great Guptas, and the penal code was more sanguinary than then, probably in consequence of the social disruption caused by the Hun invasions, the country still enjoyed the benefit of control by a powerful central authority, and the general condition evidently was fairly prosperous. The sovereign kept continually on the move and relied mainly on his personal supervision to secure efficient administration by his subordinates. The ancient political institutions seem to have fallen into decay, and so, when Harsha died in 648, the organisation which had been held together by his individual energy fell to pieces, and the result was anarchy. Harsha was the last of the great Hindu paramount sovereigns. It is true that Bhoja of Kanauj acquired and held a wide dominion for some fifty years in the ninth century, but beyond that bare fact very little is known about him, and he cannot be reckoned among the statesmen of India. Numerous minor local powers then come upon the scene, in such numbers as in themselves suffice to prove the decadence of the capacity for rule possessed by the ancients. The attempts made by these petty states in the eleventh and twelfth centuries to combine for purpose of stemming the tide of Muhammedan invasion failed disastrously with results

known to all; and for centuries no man, except Todar Mal, Akbar's finance minister, can be named who deserves remembrance as a Hindu statesman.

Modern partisan enthusiasts, actuated largely by motives of hostility to the existing government, hold up to admiration an idealised picture of Sivaji, the founder of the Mahratta empire, and his successors. But, in reality, the Mahratta government was a system of organised brigandage rather than a settled State, and its proceedings, when viewed in the cold light of historical truth, offer little to admire, and much to abhor. The times in the eighteenth century were out of joint, and it was not then possible to create a Hindu State based on the best ancient traditions. Subject to the necessary control of the British paramount power, which, so far as human foresight can discern, will be indispensable to Indian welfare for many generations to come, legitimate Hindu ambition has now a fairer, if narrower, field for its exercise; and the examples of Travancore and Mysore show that Hindus can still learn the art of government, and practise it under modern conditions on a higher plane of morality than that with which Chanakya was content.

The present has its roots in the past in India, as elsewhere; and the problems of to-day cannot be understood rightly by men ignorant of the history of their country. The highest function of the historian of the dead is to teach the living. It seems to me that the mere realisation, as a matter of common knowledge of the truth, that in olden days India could produce statesmen capable of conducting the business of government on the largest scale with credit and distinction, should tend to generate in native politicians a sense of self-respecting dignity well adapted to form a safe basis for the exercise of responsible power in the modes permitted by the conditions of the twentieth century. Although the circumstances of the Maurya and Gupta ages cannot be reproduced, even the story of times so remote has its lessons; and, apart from any specific lessons, the recognition of the fact that the authentic history of ancient India records political achievements which may be contemplated with pride, should afford a healthy stimulus to the moderns, who may be thus moved to emulate their ancestors, within the limitation imposed by the necessities of the times. That history, absolutely forgotten for many centuries, has been recovered and built up by the

labours of innumerable scholars during the last hundred years, most of whom have been Europeans—English, French, Russian, and German—the contribution made by students of Indian birth being far smaller than it ought to be. But gratifying signs are not wanting that the reproach of India's indifference to her past is being wiped away; and we may hope for the time when Indian scholars, combining a sane and enlightened patriotism with the scientific methods of European criticism, will take up the duty, which is properly theirs, of leading the way in the study of the countless Indian historical problems awaiting solution.

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